



“I am a human.”
From READY NOW
to KUNSTASYL –
A chronicle

“They were accommodated in homes anyway, more or less isolated from real living conditions, with neither a flat nor a perspective to call their own.” –This was not said about the 100 residents of the home for asylum seekers on Staakener Strasse in Berlin-Spandau, and not about the entirety of the approximately 43,000 people in Berlin who are still forced to live in “refugee homes”, sports halls or containers in the spring of 2016 either. The statement refers to the treatment of “strangers” from Vietnam, Mozambique, Angola and Cuba, who were hired in the 1960s and after by the GDR as “contract workers” under restrictive conditions. The quote is by Dagmar Neuland–Kitzerow, curator of the Museum Europäischer Kulturen. On September 10th, 2003, she was seated amongst a group of people from Brazil, the USA, Peru, Iran and Germany at a table in a 30 square metres studio at Berlin Prenzlauer Berg, busy knotting a postcard-sized section of the READY NOW carpet, 11 square metres in total, at whose innermost centre, the *mirhab*, floats the US-American aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln.

In September 2003, the war waged against Saddam Hussein by the USA with the “coalition of the willing” was already being celebrated as “won”. Iraq was destroyed. Parallel to hostilities and post-war events, the READY NOW project had developed from May to November. 246 people from 54 native countries knotted the READY NOW carpet, while verifying their own selves in relation to others in a dialogue. They revealed themselves, located their origins with a pin in a world map on the wall, reflected background and history, looked for things they had in common, the familiar in the strange. “Perhaps it helps to feel safe and secure if one supposedly knows where one belongs.”



Fig. 1 Project kick-off and friendly takeover of the exhibition rooms by KUNSTASYL

| Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum Europäischer Kulturen / Ute Franz-Scoriglia

The country Dagmar Neuland-Kitzerow used to live in had disappeared. In 1989, in her East Berlin living room, she saw on television how the Berlin wall—the monument of the German division—was overcome. It had touched her “that history forms like that, within the life of one person—when one becomes part of history like that oneself.”

“I can find my home anywhere.” With its star and red-green border, the carpet section knotted by Lina from Syria was reminiscent of her country’s flag. Whenever the social worker, 46 at the time, spoke about Damascus, the room filled up with the heavy scent of Jasmine. Her pride seduced me. I wanted to see and smell this country for myself that she was so decidedly committed to.

Dagmar Neuland-Kitzerow knotted a piece of sea spray splashing up the airplane carrier’s prow in the READY NOW carpet. The waves that are now—13 years later—flooding the exhibition rooms of the Museum Europäischer Kulturen are the expression of a political development that has been decisively accelerated by the Second Iraq War.

Hence, the long history of the *daHEIM: Glances into Fugitive Lives* project, jointly realized by KUNSTASYL and the Museum Europäischer Kulturen, goes back to the year 2003.

In 2011, when my dream to travel to Syria became true, only 23 of the 180 seats in the Airbus to Damascus were occupied. Syria was no longer a travel destination, but an area of conflict. My return flight after four weeks—hence sooner than expected—was accompanied by the parting words of Nesrin, a Syrian artist: “If there is a war, we will all be refugees—and who in the world will want us then?”

Her question hangs over the concept of KUNSTASYL.

I met Dagmar again at a bistro table in the museum cafe in 2014. At that time the number of people trying to flee to Europe had already grown beyond comprehension. “The security needed, to locate one’s self somewhere” had been lost by them all. One of them stood at the Syrian-Turkish border and shouted into a reporter’s microphone: “I AM A HUMAN BEING.”

Europe put up a defence. Those who had survived the perils of the sea or successfully overcome the approximately 2,500 kilometres of the Balkan route would now drown namelessly in the mass of similar fates as a “refugee”.

One of the homes where people that are looking for protection find shelter in Berlin is a former health authority building in Spandau. It is located right next to an industrial area, “isolated from actual living conditions, disconnected from any individual search for perspectives”. It is a place without room for sorrow, mourning, let alone hope. The Mounem family spent more than a year in the few square meters of two rooms as well. We could have run into each other in Damascus. Our flats were only 200 meters apart.

In February 2015, the home for asylum seekers started turning into an enclave where people with and without homes, artists, creative minds and asylum-seekers asked themselves the same questions as KUNSTASYL. Questions that had



Fig. 2 Waterglas symphony “Ode to Joy – Placing Hope in Europe” amongst others with Dachil Sado, Ina Sado, Aymen Montasser, and Diwali Haskan | Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum Europäischer Kulturen / Ute Franz-Scarciglia

already been mulled over in 2003 at the knotting table of *READY NOW*: “Who am I in relation to the other and who owns space?” All through summer we sat on DIY-furniture in the wasteland, and when the sun went down at 9 p.m., even the home’s ugly front would give in to our Utopia and light up in pink. We shared time and space while practicing the overcoming of borders—borders of belonging, mental walls, own barricades.

The group that assembled at the tables in the home’s common room in December 2015 was large. People from Bosnia, Albania, Kosovo, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq met with the executive team of the Museum Europäischer Kulturen. The deprived space of a shelter for asylum-seekers witnessed the forging of a cooperation in which the museum mapped out a counter-image to a defensive Europe: access was not refused, but ventured.

Since March 2016, mounted on the facade and visible from afar, the flags of the Museum Europäischer Kulturen und *KUNSTASYL* have been jointly welcoming visitors. The museum renounced its claim to representation: instead of a paternalistic gesture of participation, it granted autonomy. What started in a home (*Heim*) became possible in the museum: *Heim* became daHEIM (at home)—a fragile construct of glances into fugitive lives.